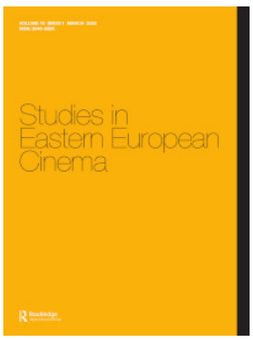

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The Cold War Will Not Take Place: The Cold War in Non-Western Videogames

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the Cold War was depicted in videogames from outside the West. Using Jean Baudrillard's double spiral of symbolic exchange and simulation as its theoretical framework, it describes the generation of the hyperreal in Western countries. The hyperreal is directly tied to machines in the welfare and warfare state that made the Cold War a battle that could never be fought. While these machines and the knowledge factories of which they were a part offered ludic alternatives to war in the West, in Eastern Europe and beyond, sitting outside of the Western hyperreal, they offer an opportunity to recollect and model human experiences of the inhumanities of their oppressors, through a certain point in history where digital technology and the downfall of the Eastern bloc coalesced. In this space, videogames from across Eastern Europe and Asia are interrogated in their form, function, content, distribution, and delivery to position non-Western videogames as offering a viable alternative to the technosphere that eventually swallows the world in its integral reality, indirect products of a war that could not take place.

KEYWORDS

Videogames; Baudrillard; transpolitical; Cold War; protest games

Introduction: Outside the Hyperreal

Videogames are famously media of wish-fulfilment. Providing players with the opportunity to partake in scenarios that were thought impossible, they fulfil Heidegger's maxim that contemporary technology pushes the world beyond what is possible and therefore becomes impossible. In the Cold War West, early videogames were programmed on machines designed for calculating the outcomes of nuclear assault on the population of the world. As computing power increased, the answer merely became mired in a paradox that such an exchange could not take place, due to its catastrophic effects on the world and especially humanity's place within it. Framed by this impossibility, during human and computer down-time, computers were employed to provide ludic alternatives to nuclear war, offering a different, malleable version of coming to terms with the end of the world, even if their names and intent, *Spacewar!* (Russel 1962) and *Star Trek* (Mayfield et al. 1971), suggested that these were based on continuing human dominance of Earth and the space beyond it.

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For Jean Baudrillard, one of the heirs to Heidegger's thought and one of the great theorists of the Cold War (Bishop 2009), this totalitarian ideology is realised by globalisation and the ruination of the real by and through capital. Yet Baudrillard is clear in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002) that the world resists all forms of utter domination, be that capitalism, or specifically in the case of this paper, communism. In positioning the Cold War as a continuum of excess, time, goods, weapons, communication, and information and a recess of space, exchange, destruction, interaction, and intellect, the draining of the real is assured as the hyperreal—or integral reality (Baudrillard 2005)—is increasingly realised through 20th-century welfare and warfare as technologies take over management of entire societies. Power gurgles away from politics and politicians and becomes realised elsewhere. Just as economics is tied to the abstraction of the stock market, becoming transeconomic as the real economy's health is governed by an abstract index of numbers based on management of demand and supply, politics is no longer tied to the organisation and health of society. Politics is less about government and more about management of metrics and indices of popularity. Effectively, politics is gamified (as seen in the RPG parlance of the UK's 'levelling up' programme) and, like videogames, dispersed everywhere, across all spheres. Videogames' position as the pre-eminent media of the 21st century, founded in the knowledge factories of the Cold War, therefore become a transpolitical medium, derived from its technocratic origins and evident in their discourse of a technologically closed world which refracts, as it simultaneously produces, the hyperreality encompassing it.

While the genealogy of Western videogames is well established, this article questions how videogames produced outside of the hyperreal differ in their articulation of daily life during the Cold War. The people who experienced and created the games discussed in this article had a very different and keen awareness of how the real could be utilised to define human futures that were yet to unfold in response to the inhumanities of the past they were subject to. This is especially the case in *The Adventures of Indiana Jones on Wenceslas Square in Prague on January 16, 1989* (Anonymous 1989) or in witnessing the decompensation of Soviet totalitarianism in *17.11.1989* (Doublesoft 1989). In providing a different reality, these games also offer a view onto past revolutions belonging to a different 'mental universe' (Baudrillard 1993: 91), rendering a past based on models rather than documented events. In some ways, this is the only way to comprehend the inhuman acts of the oppressors of this period of the 20th century, through technologies that the oppressors themselves could not comprehend and therefore stood outside of the mental, symbolic, and semiotic universe of Eastern European time and space, showing how videogames become transpolitical and transcultural as well as being transnational. This is only a pause button on the events of the time though. At the cessation of the Cold War, the hyperreal had leached into Eastern Europe as the fast-rewind through history finds in *P.R.E.S.T.A.V.B.A.* (1988), before becoming fully (hyper-)realised in *Perestroika* (1990) itself, an outright simulation of the technosphere of high finance, credit, and markets that were unleashed on Eastern Europe in the shock therapy of the post-Soviet world.

These games, complemented by a smaller number of examples from Japan such as *Strider* (Capcom 1989), show how videogames were able, in their early days at least, to operate as part of the 'double spiral', which is key to the dual form of simulation and symbolic exchange that is central to Baudrillard's work throughout and beyond the Cold War. For one moment, in the West in the form of arcades, and in the East in the form of homebrew videogames,

the real flickered within the hyperreal, slivering an unrealised future. Much political philosophy and sci-fi speculates on the ramifications of different sets of worlds that did not come to pass because of an integral drive towards the elimination of the real. This paper shows how the transpolitics of videogames developed outside of this system also articulated a different world, for better or worse.

The Excess and Absence of the Cold War

In the foundational philosophical work, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (2006), the 'double spiral' (Gane 1991) of Baudrillard's work is established. This spiral is made up of the symbolic plane, a social and economic existence common to all human societies, whether archaic or modern, and the planes of simulacra, specific to scientific, capitalist societies. In revisiting the work of French anthropologists such as Mauss (2005), the circulation of gifts within archaic societies is reconsidered, engendering social relations, and increasing the commonwealth of interdependent communities. The anthropological challenge arises, not when there is a lack of wealth, but when there is an excess. In Bataille's analysis (1985, 1989), where societies accrue excess beyond levels where gifts can be exchanged in potlatch, the ostentatious destruction of goods becomes symbolic of a wealth that has exceeded the limits of society. These actions have a dual purpose. The burning of wheat or slaughter of animals means that scattered ashes and rotting carcasses provide nourishment for the soil and invocation of the food chain with a renewal of natural riches following from season-to-season and year-to-year. The by-product of this ostentation is symbolic display of power. The more an individual can be seen to produce and then destroy, the more excess wealth they are seen to have in comparison to other communities.

Obvious parallels to the contemporary are apparent here. Capitalist societies, through techniques honed in nature and perfected via machine technologies, integrate the excess of waste into the nexus of the consumer society. Here, it can take one or many of several forms. It is redirected as part of a circulation of redistribution (with accordant weak signs of gift giving) to the poor, e.g. via charity; it becomes artisanal and a delicacy (e.g. brewing beer, wine and cheese making, see Serres 2007) and part of a continuum of conspicuous consumption often based around geographical space, which is politically protected (Parmesan, Champagne). With respect to the symbolic plane enhanced by the thrall of the global marketplace, excess goods are burnt or stockpiled to keep prices high (for the poor) and low (for the rich). In the final and ultimate reckoning, it is used, as also seen in archaic societies, in warfare, a spectacular destruction of goods and humans serving the purpose of absence—using death as demographic control—and excess—by adding scientific and technological knowledge to the incumbent society. That destruction through war is a repeatable and reproductive characteristic of the organisation of human societies is important. As Bataille notes, the two world wars of the 20th century 'organized the greatest orgies of wealth—and of human beings—that history has recorded. Yet these orgies coincide with an appreciable rise in the general standard of living' (1989: 37). In the double spiral of the symbolic and simulacra, archaic and modern, the inevitability of humanity is its pathetic wont for self-destruction. Yet wars, even in their horror and destruction of entire civilisations, are seen by anthropologists as prophylaxis against other, greater problems which may or may not come to pass, leading Bataille to

the conclusion in 1967 that 'man is only a roundabout, subsidiary response to the problem of growth' (37).

The detonation of two nuclear bombs over the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in May 1945 would seem to be evidence of humanity's final mastery over the 'superabundance' (Bataille 1989: 29) of energy which, until this point, only the sun could provide. Following the end of WW II, nuclear power was propagated as a cheap fuel source which was pollution-free at the point of use and, in its own double spiral, could be harnessed as an energy source to civilian populations and a totem of military supremacy. In picking up the fuel rod from Bataille in 1976 with *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard begins his career as the consummate Cold War theorist (Bishop 2009), positioning the problem of excess as one that no longer has a solution. In the East and the West, as nuclear power aggregated on both sides, weapons were pushed beyond their limits of use within society. When the knowledge factories of RAND supported the principle of a first strike through complex computations of wargames, they ran against two problems operating in the double spiral. The first is the political cost of the megadeaths incurred in the massive human death toll, which goes against the essence of 'good' that capitalist societies pursue at all costs. This is entwined with the second, a symbolic impasse that 'our relations to objects are no longer living and mortal but instrumental (we know no longer how to destroy them, and we no longer expect our own death)' (Baudrillard 2006: 166). It is not possible to use the weapons due to the death they will cause while it is simultaneously not possible to destroy them because they are too valuable and too dangerous. This results in an impossible exchange where monetary capital, intellectual endeavour, human labour, and natural forces are encapsulated in missiles that can never be used.

This energy, a historical standing reserve held in future abeyance, must go somewhere and in this suspended animation, the fatal strategy of the object is revealed. In one of the original—and certainly most profound—examples of the hyperreal spilling into the real, all of the quantification of simulations, wargames, and calculations found in the knowledge factories of MIT and RAND combine with the qualification of narrative fictions of megadeaths and nuclear winters, from the movie *Threads* (Jackson & Wolfes 1984) to Nevil Shute's novel *On the Beach* (Kramer 1957), brought to the silver screen in 1959, and from videogames such as *Battlezone* (Atari 1980a) to *Missile Command* (Atari 1980b), to generate a world of excess marked only by the absence of time needed to prepare for utter annihilation of the human race. Gane's observation that nuclear war will not happen because it would deprive us of its own spectacle is cold comfort (1991: 175) as it is evident by this point that hyperreality, realised in the technologies that simultaneously integrate humans more closely with the machines that kill them either physically or symbolically, has re-hewn the weave of everyday life. In the writing of his last major work, Baudrillard observes that the elimination of the symbolic is totally complete in the 21st century as the techniques and technologies of the hyperreality borne of the Cold War are universally 'ground into the tiniest interstices of social and political life' (Baudrillard 2005: 119; Bishop 2009: 50). The use of networked computers to undertake all areas of human relations from writing to reading to romance would suggest this is an integral reality for many in capitalist societies, a blanket falling silently across a world that cannot realise and cannot destroy its fatal objects, acquiescing Bataille's insistence that 'through labour and technique' humans 'have made possible the extension of growth beyond given limits' (1989: 37).

Transpolitics and Fatal Strategies

At the end of the Cold War, Baudrillard had largely abandoned any pretence of portraying his thought in philosophical treatise, with *The Transparency of Evil* (1993 [1990])—a series of essays analysing the wider social effects of excess and absence found in impossible exchange. The abeyance of monetary capital in stock markets, sex in pornography, and knowledge in computers both elides in its technical interaction and unveils, in the fatal object, the absence of wealth, love, and intellect. From these objects derives the fatal strategy where 'striving for one's ends drags you irresistibly in the opposite direction; or alternatively one in which not striving for your ends gets you to them without wanting to' (Baudrillard and Noailles 2007: 127).

A Cold War primer of this dynamic is seen in the warfare state of the United States subsidising the welfare states of Western Europe and Japan. The nuclear umbrella projected by the former to protect civilians from war permitted the latter to spend money protecting its citizens from unemployment, ignorance, and disease. While many inventions (and ultimately consumer goods, where in the world do microwave ovens originate from?) were crafted in the warfare state before being perfected in the welfare state, there is a spilling over of the hyperreal into everyday life, both in anticipating and minimising death in war and preventing death from disease and poverty. The bitter double spiral of the fatal strategy becomes evident. The aftermath of WW II heralds a population which 'benefits from more and more unproductive services; work is reduced and wages are increased overall' (Bataille 1989: 37). Yet instead of the realisation of a Keynesian utopia, the excess of time haunts the world as an absence of tomorrow, like unfired nuclear missiles, leaving whole segments of society, from the absolute destitution of poor countries to the fractal urban and rural poverty of capitalist ones, 'deep frozen' (Baudrillard 1993: 33) in a 'fourth world' which is 'made up of entire social groups being laid waste from the inside' (Baudrillard 2010: 123).

If the Cold War was World War III continuing WW II through the means of the hyperreal collapsing into the real, then the fourth World War is the collapse of this future into the present, a battle no longer 'between peoples, states, systems and ideologies, but rather of the human species against itself' (Baudrillard 2004), a world that remains shadowed by the ostentation of war and waste in the symbolic plane but only insofar as it can be realised in its own destruction. This is abstracted in the form of simulations (the *fin de siècle* disaster film, videogames, Ballardian fiction), or in poverty and catastrophe, actualised as a '*result of our societies withdrawing political interest, of our advanced societies withdrawing social interest* … It can only be compared to the thousands of tons of coffee that were burnt in railway engines to keep up the world price' (Baudrillard 2010: 123, original emphasis).

At one level, the invention of videogames in the knowledge factories of American universities and thinktanks, crafted on computers designed to simulate nuclear war (Crogan 2011), appears as the primary entertainment medium of game-theoreticians running scenarios of WW III, their form and content a simulation of the hyperreal world that computers themselves had generated. They become elementally transpolitical where everything 'is political. Everything is aesthetic. All at once. Everything has acquired political meaning' so 'we are now in a transpolitical sphere … a stage which also implies the reproduction of politics, its endless simulation' (Baudrillard 1993: 10–11). The taglines of videogames developed during and inspired by the Cold War validate this: *Raid Over Moscow* (1984; 'Play it like there's no tomorrow!'), *DEFCON* (2006; 'Everybody dies'), and *Shadow President* (1993;

'The simulation of presidential world power') are framed by the paradoxical language of Cold War calculations and geopolitical jargon.

Yet at another level, videogames are the quintessential fatal strategy, the content of original games such as *Star Trek* and *Spacewar!* programmed as a simulated method using the ludic to come to terms with the excess of weapons, reality, information, and consumption in a world absent of destruction, social relations, intelligence, and production. Videogames were borne of the hacks of computer scientists using human and machine 'downtime' to program games on hardware that it was never designed for, an ostentatious, luxurious display of the capabilities of a specific community pushing the machine of war far beyond its original intentions. With the unproductivity of human and machine turned against itself, a kind of inversion, or at least mopping up, of the hyperreal was partially achieved. While in their early commercial use in coin-operated arcades, videogames appeared to take on the form of simulation, in that the machine 'doesn't serve you, it *tests* you' (Baudrillard 2006: 63, original emphasis), through preserving lives, achieving high scores, and displays of proficiency; these remain the very predicates that enhance the senses that competitive games induce a feeling of stupefaction as considerable sums of money and energy are expended in their pursuit (Bataille 1985: 119). The exchange of money, drugs, food, alcohol, sex, and fighting in amusement arcades suggest that they were arenas where the double spiral twirled dimly if hazardously. If weakened by the presence of hyperreal technology, society quizzed itself, through a series of increasingly bizarre moral panics what to do with this nexus of human and technological forces, which brought cohorts together in one space and time from across a spectrum of communities (Amis 1982). At this time, games became transpolitical not only in their form and function, but in their social relations. They were condemned for their unproductivity, the maxim that videogames are a waste of time an accusation—along with play for wider civilisation—they have never been able to rub away. As Coulter shows in Baudrillard's attention to the ludic generally and to videogames specifically they 'fascinate as much as they repel' (2007: 359), with their effects at the margins of political economy a 'flow which must not stop', always 'profitable and brutal, but never fatal' (2007: 359). During the fallout from the Cold War, Baudrillard (1996) views videogames as one of the last vestiges of democracy, with wholesale acceptance of their arbitrary ruleset, negotiated outcomes and win/loss mechanisms viewed as a sphere of fair play in a world which has long abandoned them in the political. In this they are the triumph of the transpolitical, illuminating the time when symbolic exchange flickered on games' screens, before being sanitised into the domestic domain, where excess content, processing power and graphics would become sacred, absent from its origins in the nooks of knowledge factories and the moral panic-infused neon of amusement arcades.

Wargames without the West

With the fading of the symbolic in the US and wider Western capitalist societies, the importance of other geographical areas to the development of videogames and their potential for transpolitical, perhaps symbolic, influence during the Cold War is the thrust of this article. Baudrillard, like Barthes before him, keenly silhouettes the intransigence of Japanese culture throughout his work, fascinated by its resistance to traditional modes of analysis unencumbered by the goals of the Western project, passing from the universal 'realm of laws (capital, value, economy and meaning)' towards the 'realm of rules (play, rituals, ceremonies, cycles,

repetition)' (Baudrillard 1993: 143). This provides a framework for examining the games that emerge from Japan during the Cold War. Heralded first by the abstraction of Taito's *Space Invaders* (1978), which may signify the coming ascendency of Japanese power in the realm of industrial production, it appears that Japan conducts itself with the self-effacement, perhaps self-flagellation, of the vanquished nation, defeated by the superabundant energy of nuclear technology, in the form of Capcom's *1943: The Battle of Midway* (1987), where a US aeroplane attacks Japan during the Battle of Midway and the obsequiousness of US Ramboism found in Konami's *Green Beret* (1985). As Baudrillard identifies, however, this may be an illusion, with the Japanese the great 'play-actors of technology' in that 'the most effective actor must have detachment and his own inspiration must come from outside—from the role or from the technical object' (1993: 143), a concept also vital to the use of videogames in opposing state oppression in Eastern Europe.

While there is apparently clear distancing of transpolitical messages from the Western perspective, especially in games revisiting the Vietnam war, such as *Operation Wolf* (1987), games such as *Strider* project a communist future for the Eurasian continent even at the dawn of the USSR's collapse. In drawing on popular Western signs of the manifestation of Marxist ideology, with glittering basilicas impressed with Soviet stars, hormonally enhanced strongmen, and politburo military-tsars who transform into bio-mech centipedes, it becomes clear that Eurasia is a global project that has its Giger-tentacles in resurrecting dinosaurs and transforming apes into skeletal iron giants. In common with Capcom's precursor, *Forgotten Worlds* (1988), its use of classical mythology in combination with industrial-era tech generates a collision between past and future chronologies. While the brazen imagery of a global Soviet is pervasive, the message of the human alteration of the natural and social realms towards its own globalising ends is the enduring refrain. Grandmaster Meio, the hooded boss character who reigns over the chaos, hails from 'the third moon', an artificial planet orbiting Earth, represented by a crystal ball Meio clasps in his ancient hands, so encompassing the planet first in human hands and then with the artificial satellite. With globalisation achieved through the orbit of satellites, first of inhuman machines, then non-humans (e.g. apes, dogs), then humans, then the posthuman of 'loan, finance, the technosphere communications—all have become satellites in an inaccessible space and left everything else to go to rack and ruin', the natural order of things is upset, twisted and inverted, spinning out of control so that it is 'man with his planet Earth, with his territory, with his body who is now the satellite' (Baudrillard 1993: 30–31). The rack and ruin left by technology is the wreckage and rubble of the Cold War, where the planet used to mine resources to make weapons too impossible to use and hazardous to destroy is simultaneously the world's dustbin. Nuclear power, even in its civilian guise, is tainted by the fallout of the war that never took place. In *Raid Over Moscow*, the final level takes place in a reactor protected by a droid who fires discus-like projectiles at the player. For *Strider*, produced in a time and space tainted by the fallout of Chernobyl's meltdown, the event that prefigured the decompensation of the Soviet Union's communist project, Strider's infiltration of a similarly renegade reactor puts the human character in orbit around the inhuman antagonist, becoming weightless as he spins around the radioactive hecatomb where the laws of nature no longer apply, or even need apply.

This experience is the condition of a globalised world whose fatal strategy is unknown in its consequences as the 'centrifugal force of our proliferating technologies has stripped us of all weight and transferred us into an empty freedom of movement' (Baudrillard 1993:

31). Strider becomes orbital as he circles the technology that should never have come to pass. This is a process which places the nonhumans of nature in opposition to themselves, mutated by placebo and nocebo effects of human/inhuman technology where gain-of-function is a permissible aim of science, altering nonhuman animal viruses through transgenic/posthuman methods to ensure optimal virulence and transmissibility. In the 2020s, humans reside on a globe constituted by the first, third, and fourth worlds, with wars taking place in the deserts of the Earth, the moribund networks of the Internet or the vacuums of space. In these conflicts between and among themselves, Earth is its own satellite, moving through space, 'dragged into an orbital motion which threatens to become perpetual' (Baudrillard 1993: 31). Sega's game *S.D.I.* (1986), where the player takes on the role of a satellite in space (after being a commander of ICBM silos in *Missile Command*) is the final realisation of the human becoming an inhuman satellite *ex orbito* of the Earth, the third planet from the sun spinning around machines like Strider encircling the centrifuges of a renegade reactor on an Earth whirling around the third moon.

Calling for a Revolution within

While the movement of videogames into the domestic realm in Western capitalism appeared to signify the end of any remaining symbolic resistance, the same was not the case in Europe, where home computers allowed individuals to develop as well as consume videogames on the same machine. Whereas in Western Europe this was inevitably immediately commercialised, the lack of access to private computers, or at least the ones that could run games in Eastern Europe led to them being used in ways that copied, if not heralded, a revolution. Again, the political, ideological, and social connotations of this separation from 'universal' (i.e. global/Western) laws and values towards a rule-based domain demands Baudrillard's analysis as the 'USSR and Eastern bloc constituted not just a deep freeze for freedom, but also a laboratory, an experimental environment in which freedom was isolated and subject to very high pressures' (1993: 94). The games created in Eastern Europe were at once transpolitical and hyperreal in their content of simulating a better tomorrow of freedom under capitalist democracy, but equally, in the nexus of their double spiral, they may not have sought to barter freedom away 'in a fervent embrace of automobiles and kitchen appliances' (Baudrillard 1993: 94), but instead offered an alternative view of the future, one that even the most daring of *fin de siècle* sci-fi may not have dared dream. These may be unrealised utopias and not the dystopian dreams of our own annihilation seen in Japanese videogames: how can a silicon vision of the future be envisaged without the quicksilver of the hyperreal in the still frozen real of Eastern European Cold War games?

In Eastern Europe of the late 1980s, videogame culture partly took on the role of an underground counter-political movement, aimed at undermining the dictatorial and absolutistic Soviet system and generating a sense of revolution in the young. They formed the shock waves coming from the inside of the frozen system and heralded a new era—one in which the technological melts the stasis of history by entering a digital future. The history of computing in Eastern Europe, however, is an ambivalent one, and one that is intricately linked with politics and policies. With the slow rise of computerisation in the Soviet Union during the 1970s, computers and their uses stirred interest in the young. Programming was part of the curriculum of many university degrees, but ironically, the students mostly never saw a computer while learning its language on paper (Manovich 2001: 3). The application

of this knowledge was thought to be situated in areas that would benefit the system, such as the military and planning calculations. Warfare and welfare were interlinked in the USSR because the system needed to be fed with both to reproduce and maintain itself.

In the 1980s, albeit very slowly, computers began to become a means for entertainment, but a non-commercial one. Privately-owned computers remained rare, and in 1989, only 1.8 percent of the Czechoslovak population owned a home computer (Švelch 2018: 1), and those that owned one often did not use it for entertainment. To give more people access to computers, clubs formed in Eastern European cities during the second half of the 1980s, many of them with state sponsorship (Schmitt and Wadsworths 2002; Švelch 2013, 2019b). They became knowledge factories, exchanging ideas of how to program, manipulate, and share new software (Wasiak 2010: 7; Švelch 2013). On the one hand, these clubs explored Western games smuggled into the East, such as *Raid Over Moscow*, played on Commodore 64 and ZX Spectrum home computers, equally smuggled into the country, hidden in diplomatic suitcases or concealed in the benches of cars (Fiscutean and and Others 2020). Kerr (2006: 1) has noted that these commercial 'games appear to epitomise an ideal type of global post-industrial neo-liberal cultural product', which is not something that was easily accessible in Eastern Europe. The circulation of goods, common to symbolic societies where gift and counter-gift allow negotiation through and of social interaction, is in evidence here, countered in the double helix by the circuits of hardware and lines of code that make up an 'ultra-fluidity, by means of circulation' (Baudrillard 1993: 95).

While the USSR made sure that their own technological development was driven in close distance to that of the West by 'effectively stealing and re-marketing Western technology' (Wilson 2009: 41), they focussed on computers for industrial and educational use, not for entertainment and home-use, the anchor remains in a material pre-end of history of production, rather than an immaterial consumption of code. The USSR's interest in Western technology also explains why these illicit importations were frequently not sanctioned, while another reason was that the secret censors—the StB in Czechoslovakia, the RBP in Poland, the Stasi in East Germany, the AVO/AVH in Hungary, and the Russian KGB in many other parts, including the Ukraine—did not recognise videogames as potentially political (Gießler 2018; Seiwald 2021), while equally acknowledging programming as a skill that can be beneficial to the state. Due to lacking copyright laws in Eastern European states, the gamers themselves frequently did not question the legality of sharing videogames with their peers, copying them onto cassettes, and thus disseminating them manifoldly (Švelch 2019a). The line between sharing and hacking soon became blurred, with computer clubs showing their young members how games can be cracked, copied, and manipulated. To that end, the transpolitical message these games coming over from the West contained—one not necessarily aimed at the people living in the countries of the Eastern bloc but still with a view towards the fringes of the restrictive policies of communism/socialism from its outside—was not detected by those embedded in the system, while the underground resistance saw the potential for games to promote a utopia that does not rely on the products of the hyperreal affordances of the West where the 'idea of freedom has died its fine death' but instead builds on the freedom of the individual in its subjectification, 'stripped of all its signs' (Baudrillard 1993: 94). This also echoes Baudrillard's argument, mentioned above, of subversive games offering a different 'mental universe' (1993: 91)—either in the form of East versus West or then versus now—, situating games as a potent way of countering the oppressive system because it has no agency in the game world.

While these games were made in the West and not primarily with an Eastern audience in mind, they showed young Eastern Europeans that videogames can be used as means to grind away at the foundations of the authoritarian state from within the system itself. This flips the focus from what players do with games to what their creators want to achieve with them. This form of dissent through games was particularly pronounced in Czechoslovakia, which had a very active sub-culture of young programmers. To analyse how the Cold War and resistance against the dictatorial power structures implemented by the state played out in underground political games produced in these countries, their production, dissemination, and legacy need to be considered to map out the ways these cultural artefacts worked against a political system that promoted absence and condemned excess. Many of the games produced in Czechoslovakia, which, according to Švelch (2013), was the most active country regarding 'homebrew' (i.e. non-professional) game-making and distinct from the 'home-coding' of places like the UK, were text-adventures because with political games, the focus was on communicating information and not on gameplay. Another reason was that they could easily be programmed in BASIC (Beginners' All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code), which was developed in 1964 (Kemeny and Kurtz 1964) and could be run on the computers available in the countries of the Eastern bloc in the late 1980s (Švelch 2019b). One of the most famous of these games was *The Adventures of Indiana Jones on Wenceslas Square in Prague on January 16, 1989*, which was a response to the police brutality the protesters were faced with when they gathered in the centre of Prague to protest the oppressive communist regime in Czechoslovakia on the titular day. Indiana Jones is arguably the epitome of Western heroism, signalling freedom and resistance against oppression, but due to censorship, the movies were only available in the East after the fall of the Iron Curtain (Fiscutean and Others 2020). This means that while the character was known to people in Eastern Europe, they only learned about him by patching together snippets from reviews and interviews instead of seeing the movies. Although the game focuses on the American hero, it foremost evokes the events happening in 1969, when Jan Palach burned himself on the stairs of the national museum in Prague to protest the hopelessness of the political system in Czechoslovakia (Kanturková 1992: 175–180).

This, arguably extremely difficult, text-adventure game asks the player in their role of Jones to fight their way through the protests to return home to the US. The game begins with Jones situated in the middle of Wenceslas Square, just underneath the saint's statue. He is surrounded by police, bullets, tear gas, glass shards, and water cannons, while his only weapon is an axe. With this, he must fight his way through the protesters, dying repeatedly, in order to reach freedom. While the character can reach the US if the player manages to finish the game, the people living in Czechoslovakia cannot easily travel into the West, at least not legally. The game thus becomes an alternative 'mental universe' (Baudrillard 1993: 91), a substitution for protest and a fight that cannot be fought safely, and one that would result in the crushing of the people underneath the state's might. In this, it anticipates the concept of the fourth world war as a fight of humanity against itself. While this is hyper-realised in a technical, technological, technocratic West, as *Strider* shows, this can just as easily come to pass in Eastern bloc utopian desires. Unlike the early stages of the Cold War, the uprisings within the countries of the Eastern bloc during the late 1980s were not fed by the politics of antagonism between states, but between in-state authority and the people. The population of Czechoslovakia did not seek to define itself against the West but to determine their freedom in the context of their existence. Where totalitarianism exists, in

the fervour of fundamentalism, be that economic, religious, political, or cultural (or all four together), the world resists through the fatal strategy of events, where a rupture from the real appears, without warning or hail to resist and realign through *revolt*. The self-immolation of Palach is a revolting act in its humanity, but at the same time reminds the world what it is like to be alive. A living thing is never more alive than faced with death, hence the revolution that accompanied the act in 1969 that it is a humane act, in contradistinction to the inhumanity of the oppressors. Thereby, Indiana Jones may be a Western hero, but is not a simulation of freedom or even its Virillian substitution: the message the game communicates is not one of US glorification, but one of his fight against state authorities to gain freedom. That is, despite possessing a clear reference to the West, it is a wargame without the West.

The Adventures of Indiana Jones on Wenceslas Square in Prague on January 16, 1989 was released anonymously and distributed among the gaming community on cassette tapes (Švelch 2019b). The content and images it communicates are those of police and regime brutality on the one hand, while emphasising the crumbling powers of the communist state over its citizens on the other hand. An equally political game is *17.11.1989*, which allows the player to explore the onset of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, which led to the collapse of the one-party rule and ultimately the end of communism in the country, culminating in the presidency of Václav Havel in the December of the same year (Vaněk and Mücke 2016: 1–14). Švelch (2018: 211), in reference to Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweizer (2010: 6), describes both games as 'newsgames', which sit 'at the intersection of videogames and journalism'. In *17.11.1989*, the player is set the task of filming police brutality amidst the chaos of the demonstrations, and to do so, they need to find a camera, a cassette, and batteries located somewhere in an apartment block. While the gameplay and the story do not immediately relate to the revolt and violence, the paratexts surrounding the game make its reaction to the Velvet Revolution clear. The loading screen, for example, displays the phrase 'Nechceme násilí' (English: 'We do not want violence'), which, according to Švelch (2013), is 'one of the most powerful and popular slogans of the Velvet Revolution'. This political message is an important one since it underlines the argument that in Czechoslovakia, and all of Eastern Europe of the late 1980s, videogames frequently served the purpose of circulating a political message in the underground and outside of the media that were closely monitored by the secret police. This is connected to the circumstance that Eastern Europe did not have a market for commercial games, but software was instead circulated in the underground and between clubs, yet spotlights the concept that the only way to bring down a system is by using an incomprehensible form, a fatal strategy of the technology itself. For Baudrillard (2002), this can best be seen in the inversion of Western modes of communication and media in the Twin Towers attacks and is evident on a smaller scale in these examples. Through this line of communication, it became possible to also spread political messages, such as the call for resistance against the oppressive Czechoslovak regime embedded in *17.11.1989*, awakening it from its frozen history.

Irony at the End of the Iron Curtain

The games discussed above directly speak to the player in an attempt to encourage resistance to the oppressive political system dominating the Eastern bloc countries. *Shatokhin* (1988) also communicates a strong political message, but instead of talking about police brutality

and subjugation, it shows the decay of the Soviet state in an ironic twist of the opposition between the East and the West. The player, embodying soviet Major Shatokhin, the star of a widely circulated propaganda video and the epitome of Soviet heroism (Švelch 2018: 202; Reed 2021), is tasked to kill John Rambo, ascribed an aura of American arrogance the East despises. The game opens with a huge hammer and sickle, which further underlines this game's (pretended) loyalty to socialist ideology. However, the game is so difficult that the player repeatedly gets killed by the American hero. Through this tight connection between gameplay mechanics and story, Stanislav Hrda, the game's programmer located in Bratislava (Fiscutean and Others 2020), could avoid any repercussions because the game looked anti-American on the surface, while it displayed the weakness of the Soviet powers in its superstructure by means of absurd jokes mocking the Soviet regime. Hrda further incorporated a mini game in *Shatokhin*, which can be accessed if the player redefines the keys to 'K', 'G', and 'B' (Švelch 2019a). This has the effect that the roles are switched, meaning that the player now controls Rambo, who must kill the Major. Within this game, it becomes possible for players to directly fight their way out against the state authorities and towards (political) freedom and thus are able to access a different 'mental universe' (Baudrillard 1993: 91) that is being denied to them in real life.

The shift in power achieved by detecting the Easter egg in *Shatokhin* is a subtle way to unravel the craggy foundations of the USSR during the late 1980s. *P.R.E.S.T.A.V.B.A.* (Czech for 'perestroika', presented as an acronym, Engl. *Reconstruction*), a game released anonymously but created by Czech programmer Miroslav Fídler in 1988 (Švelch 2018: 206), is far more overt in its sarcastic portrayal of the USSR (Reed 2021). This text-adventure follows a loyal comrade, who needs to escape a building. The player's commands are mostly answered in the style of propaganda films, complete with prominent party slogans, yet the context in which they appear ridicules them and mocks the whole socialist system. For example, the comrade cannot see what is in a room because it is too dark, but his lighter, labelled as 'Made in the USSR', only works thirty percent of the time. Luckily, Marx's *Kapital* can be found in the same room and used as a torch to 'enlighten' the player's view. A similarly comical situation occurs when the comrade can only be motivated to dig a tunnel after reading a worker's magazine, which evokes a taste for labour in him. The outdatedness of everything associated with the Eastern bloc—from the political system, to literature, and items of everyday use, which are all frozen in time—is repeatedly emphasised in a ridiculing manner. The game even goes a step further: If the player successfully completes the game, they are greeted by the message 'Congratulations once more. We will all meet on 21 August in Old Town Square … (Or anywhere else)' (Švelch 2018: 205), which references the date in 1988, when a mass protest was organised to commemorate the end of the Prague Spring on the same day in 1968. The game therefore portrays the frozen world of Soviet Russia but uses the affordances of the medium to shake off the dust and herald a new era.

A look at original games programmed in Czechoslovakia of the 1980s reveals that numerous homebrew games were made to communicate political content, albeit many other games solely served the purpose of showing the programmer's skills to the community (Švelch 2013). The reactionism of these games is largely directed to the inside, with an audience of people living under the same restrictive system of socialism and communism as the game makers. The politics and utopias they create in their digital worlds emphasise a concept of freedom that originates in the individual, and not one that is bound to commercialisation and abundance. Despite featuring core American heroes, the idea of breaking free is

associated with the young generation living in the USSR. They see videogames as generators that allow them to melt the progression of history that has been deeply frozen in the USSR for decades (Baudrillard 1993: 94). These games therefore display a side of the Cold War conflict that is largely ignored by the West, namely one that demonstrates the workings of the regime in a subjugation of its own people.

Necrospective

While the games discussed until now mainly look inwards in the form of a revolt against political oppression, other games shift the perspective towards the West in their attempt to fathom a concept of capitalism and economic progression that fits the cultural framework of the Eastern bloc. These games do not encourage players to take action against the system in real life, but they function as simulators that allow players to learn about the workings of capitalism, market economy, and competition. In contrast to the subversive games discussed above, the games promoting capitalist economy generically shift from text-adventures to an emphasis on graphics, which, in a sense, also depicts the degree of commercialisation graphic games experienced in the West. The game *Perestroika*, named after Mikhail Gorbachev's politics of reconstruction and openness to the West in the final years of the Cold War, illustrates the crumbling socialism holding back the USSR's development and move towards capitalism and a market economy grounded in trade and commercialism. The player navigates a frog around lily pads to collect grocery products, making currency transactions, acquiring progressive taxes or taking part in adventures. The lily pads themselves are shrinking in acquiescence to the perpetual laws and regulations affecting the market economy in the USSR. In higher levels, the player is being chased by creatures called 'bureaucrats', which can kill the frog.

From today's perspective, this game's narrative does not sound very riotous, but its political message has been considered subversive in the late 1980s. The economic system it promotes is the form of capitalism found in the West, which is defined by an acquisition of private funds, international trading, and affluence that allows for leisure activities and entertainment—the technosphere so favoured by the satellite of the Earth. Politics and economy are tightly connected in this game, which echoes Bataille's (1989: 37) characterisation of the development of Western society towards liberation and excess with little consideration for the end consequences. The USSR finds itself at the same turning point, albeit 45 years later than the West, consistent with the fatal strategies of Soviet communism, which eventually reveal perestroika and glasnost as a 'transparently clear reverse run through all the signs of modernity, but in a speeded up motion and at second hand' where 'positive and negative signs are mixed up together, so that human rights emerge side by side with crimes, catastrophes and accidents' (Baudrillard 1993: 96–97). Just as Chernobyl melted down, so did the USSR's political leadership, the Ukrainian power station signified as a transpolitical event that liquified information around the statistics of genocides, the standing reserve of the USSR army, and the abject poverty of the fourth world holed deep inside the second one.

Perestroika emphasises this transition economically from the organised, planned economies of the East via the fiscal 'shock therapy' required of a sick patient that does not subscribe to the excess of the 'free' West. That this was realised on the simulation machine of the microcomputer shows how, in certain areas, Eastern Europe could skip through periods of development (e.g. from analogue to mobile telephony, or from the stove to the

microwave) to segue into the sheen of liberated markets factored by transeconomics, transaesthetics, and transpolitics. Yet this is less hazardous than the recklessness of the West, which, through its revisionism of the events of Eastern Europe in its own contemporary media—and this paper counts videogames as the pre-eminent media of the Cold War and the last 30 years—threatens to 'wipe out all signs of the Cold War one by one, perhaps even all the signs of World War II and those of the century's political and ideological revolutions' (Baudrillard 1993: 98), even perhaps of history itself. The vital importance of games from this era, not as artefacts, or as instructive to the state of the art, but to the experiences of everyday life is far from a necrospective of dead media. This was the last time that Europe—and the world—had a viable alternative to the excess and absence found in the Western countries of the Cold War, found not in the corrupted ideologies of the politburo, or the dystopian visions of nuclear confrontation so desired by Western media, but the utopian visions of game-makers from the East and especially Eastern Europe. The way in which the East was seen, for those inside and outside, integral and distant, is the only way that the dual form of the double helix can be found within games, and, arguably within second-world societies that no longer exist in a war that never took place.

Disclosure statement

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